

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 481

CS 214 607

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TITLE How Can Parents Model Good Listening Skills?
INSTITUTION ACCESS ERIC, Rockville, MD.; ERIC Clearinghouse on
Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED),
Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [93]
CONTRACT R1890120
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products
(071) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Caregiver Speech; *Communication Skills; Elementary
Education; *Listening Skills; *Parent Child
Relationship; *Parent Role; Skill Development
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior

ABSTRACT

Noting that listening is a very large part of school learning and one of the primary means of interpersonal communication, this pamphlet presents guidelines and suggestions for parents to help their children develop listening and communication skills. Guidelines in the pamphlet are: be interested and attentive, encourage talking, listen patiently, hear children out, and listen to nonverbal messages. Suggestions for improving communication with children discussed in the pamphlet are: be interested, avoid dead-end questions, extend conversation, share thoughts, observe signs of when to end conversations, reflect feelings, and help clarify and relate experiences. The pamphlet briefly discusses how listening skills affect learning, how parents can guide their children to better listening, and why parents are important in building children's communication skills. (RS)

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Listen Better, Learn More

In a Family Circus cartoon strip, the little girl looks up at her father, who is reading the newspaper, and says, "Daddy, you have to listen to me with your eyes as well as your ears." That statement sums up almost all there is to say about listening, whether in our personal conversations or in school.

Do Listening Skills Affect Learning?

Listening is not a school subject like reading and writing, perhaps because many think it should come naturally. The latest studies reveal, however, that listening is a very large part of school learning and is one of the primary means of interpersonal communication. It is estimated that between 50 and 75 percent of students' classroom time is spent listening to the teacher, to other students, or to audio media.

Can Parents Guide Their Children to Better Listening?

According to research on listening skills, being a good listener means focusing attention on the message and reviewing the important information. Parents can model good listening behavior for their children and advise them on ways to listen as an active learner, pick out highlights of a conversation, and ask relevant questions. Sometimes it helps to **show** children that an active listener is one who looks the speaker in the eye and is willing to turn the television off to make sure that he or she is not distracted by outside interference.

Guidelines for Modeling Good Listening Skills

- ★ **Be interested and attentive.** Children can tell whether they have a parent's interest and attention by the way the parent replies or does not reply. Forget about the telephone and other distractions. Maintain eye contact to show that you really are listening to what the child is saying.
- ★ **Encourage talking.** Some children need an invitation to start talking. You might begin with, "Tell me about your day at school." Children are more likely to share their ideas and feelings when others think them important.
- ★ **Listen patiently.** People think faster than they speak. With a limited vocabulary and little experience talking, children often take longer than adults to find the right word. Listen as though you have plenty of time.
- ★ **Hear children out.** Avoid cutting children off before they have finished speaking. It is easy to form an opinion or reject children's views before they finish what they have to say. It may be difficult to listen respectfully and not correct misconceptions, but respect their right to have and express their opinions.
- ★ **Listen to nonverbal messages.** Many messages children send are communicated nonverbally by their tone of voice, their facial expressions, their energy level, their posture, or changes in their behavior patterns. Often you can tell more from the way a child says something than from what he or she says. When a child is obviously upset, be sure to find a quiet time—then or sometime that day—to help explore those feelings.

Suggestions for Improving Communication With Children

- ★ **Be interested.** Ask about children's ideas and opinions regularly. If you show your children that you are really interested in what they think, what they feel, and what their opinions are, they will become comfortable about expressing their thoughts to you.
- ★ **Avoid dead-end questions.** Ask children the kinds of questions that will extend interaction rather than cut it off. Questions that require a simple "yes" or "no" or one correct answer lead conversation to a dead end. Questions that ask children to describe, explain, or share ideas extend conversation.
- ★ **Extend conversation.** Try to pick up a piece of your child's conversation. Respond to his or her statements by asking a question that restates or uses some of the same words your child used. If, for example, your child is looking at a picture book and calls a tiger a "kitty cat," you might say, "Yes, that looks a lot like your kitty cat," before pointing out that it is a tiger. When you use children's own phrasing or terms, you strengthen their confidence in their conversational and verbal skills and reassure them that their ideas are being listened to and valued.
- ★ **Share your thoughts.** Share what you are thinking with your child. For instance, if you are puzzling over how to rearrange your furniture, get your child involved with questions such as, "I'm not sure where to put this shelf. Where do you think would be a good place?"
- ★ **Observe signs.** Watch the child for signs that it is time to end a conversation. When a child

begins to stare into space, give silly responses, or ask you to repeat several of your comments, it is probably time to stop the exchange.

- ★ **Reflect feelings.** One of the most important skills good listeners have is the ability to put themselves in the shoes of others or empathize with the speaker by attempting to understand his or her thoughts and feelings. As a parent, try to mirror your children's feelings by repeating them. You might reflect a child's feelings by commenting, "It sounds as if you're angry at your math teacher." Restating or rephrasing what children have said is useful when they are experiencing powerful emotions that they may not fully realize.
- ★ **Help clarify and relate experiences.** As you listen, try to make your child's feelings clear by stating them in your own words. Your broader vocabulary can help children express themselves as accurately and clearly as possible and give them a deeper understanding of words and inner thoughts.

Why Are Parents Important in Building Children's Communication Skills?

Parents play an essential role in building children's communication skills because children spend more time with their parents than with any other adult. Children also have



a deeper involvement with their parents than with any other adult, and the family unit has lifelong contact with its members. Parents also control many of the contacts a child has with society as well as society's contacts with the child.

Adults, parents, and teachers set a powerful example of good or poor communication. Communication skills are influenced by the examples children see and hear. Parents and teachers who listen to their children with interest, attention, and patience set a good example. The greatest audience children can have is an adult who is important to them and interested in what they are saying.

Sources

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This publication was prepared by ACCESS ERIC in association with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. R1890120. The opinions expressed in this brochure do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Department of Education. The brochure is in the public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

